

# STHĀNIKAS - Their Socio-religious and Economic Role in Karnataka

A. D. 1215-1800

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## INTRODUCTION :

A few interesting information on socio-religious and economic functions of Sthānikas in Karnataka with particular reference to western Karnataka are gleaned from a large number of inscriptions, a few unpublished Kadatas (Writing on black clothes) and Kannada literary works. The above aspects of the Sthānikas are narrated here from the beginning of the twelfth to the end of the eighteenth centuries. It is curious to note that the role of the Sthānikas in the cultural aspects was out come of their close association with the religious institutions namely temples and Mathas.

## HISTORIC EVOLUTION OF THE STHĀNIKAS :

A study of the contemporary sources namely sanskrit literary work, Kautilya's **Arthaśāstra** indicates that the word Sthānika was an official designation in the beginning applied to a civil administrative officer, usually the manager of charitable institutions. As Kautilya observes that officer Sthānika, among others could be endowed with lands, which, of course, they had no right to alienate.<sup>1</sup> The

word **Sthānika** is figured in Karnataka from the tenth century and from the thirteenth century onwards the functions of the Sthānikas have been noticed in the inscriptions from the present South Kanara District. The religious oriented Socio Economic functions of the Sthānikas had been increasing in Karnataka from the twelfth century. The historic records of Karnataka mention **Sthānikas** as Sthānacārya, Sthānapati, Sthanattar, Sthānādipati<sup>2</sup> or Samsthanakulu.

In western Karnataka (coastal and Malnad region) the **Sthānikas** are also known as Paricharaka Brahmana, Devara Paricharaka, Siva Brahmana (Sic). Buddhivantha, Pādumalis.<sup>3</sup> It is to be remembered that the **Sthānikas** were invariably Brahmanas and priests as known from a large number of inscriptions.<sup>4</sup> Some of the epigraphs<sup>5</sup> state that the **Sthānikas** were learned scholars in **Sāstras** for that, they received honour and high respect from other Brahmanas.

At the same time we have to note that the word Sthānika is prevalent among the Jainas, Srivaisnavas and Kālamukhas and Saivas.

## III. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS :

A series of epigraphs disclose of the prominent position of the Sthānikas in the social set up in Karnataka from the tenth to end of the eighteenth centuries. They wielded powerful influence in religious oriented social activities. By exercising above activities the Sthānikas tried to maintain cordial relations among different communities. This led to social solidarity. They were entrusted to guard the gifts of the temple against obstructors.<sup>6</sup> Usually, the grants to temples were done with the knowledge of the local Sthānikas. This is known from an inscription dated 1216 A.D. found in front of the Basvangudi temple (Sorab Shimoga Districts). The grant to the above temple was executed with the knowledge of the following Sthānapatis-Bairam Jiya, the Sthānapati of the Somanātha temple at **Bandanike**, Nakeya Jiya, the Sthānapati of the God Nakharesvara, Sarvesvara Deva, the Sthānapati of the God Kotesvara at Kuppaturu and **Rudradhvaja**, the Sthānapati of the God Ramesvara of Yammanur Village. Further, the study of the epigraph reveals

that the above Sthānikas maintained communal harmony among different communities namely Bhattarakas, Settis, Jainas, Gavudas etc.<sup>7</sup>

A few inscriptions divulge of the role of the **Sthānikas** in maintaining social solidarity in coastal Karnataka. For instance, the mention of the Sthānika along with Nādavasa and Okkalusa who set up Brahmottikallu in front of the Mahadeva temple at Posral (Karkala S. K.) in the year A.D. 1215<sup>8</sup> is worthy of consideration. Similarly in case disturbances, the local Sthānikas played leading role in solving the disturbances. For instance in 1406 A.D.<sup>9</sup>, Mahabala deva, the governor of the Bārakūru Rajya had seriously interfered with the office and functions of Settikaras of Halarukeri and **Nakhara Hanjamana** of the city, Bārakūru. The interference of Governor adversely affected the social balance in the area. It was in this context Chikkanna, the Sthānapati of Hattukeri of Bārakūru appealed to the Vijayanagara Emperor, Bukka II, to set right the matter. The later at the appeal of the former, directed Mahapradhana Bachanna of Gove to enquire into the matter. The enquiry was conducted and compensations were paid to the aggrieved parties. Even in the payment of the compensations, the **Sthānikas** role was felt. The significance of the above inscription is that the local Sthānikas were eager to maintain social stability in the area.

In certain cases the Sthānikas regulated social customs. The inscriptions often refer to the Sthānikas role in regulating social and religious regulations. For example, in 1700 A. D. town merchants, town mayor and Sthānikas established certain social regulations concerning the washermen caste of fifty six countries. Among these regulations was one to the following effect. That the tax for washermen caste was one **Varaha** for a vergin woman and four **Varahas** for a widow.<sup>10</sup> Similarly unpublished Kadatas kept in the Sringeri Matha often mention the role of the Sthānikas in regulating social regulations among different communities.

The role of the Sthānikas in maintaining cordial relations among the Ganacharya (Jangama) and other communities in the Kusruru Agrahara (Shimoga district) is revealed in an inscription dated A.D. 1724 found in front of the Bhimesvara temple.<sup>11</sup>

As learned scholars in the Sāstras the Sthānikas in the coastal and Malanād region of Karnataka received high honour from the people. Even the king and prominent individuals honoured the Sthānikas.<sup>11a</sup>

As literary figures, the Sthānikas took interest in composing poems and Hymns in praise of different deities including Jaina deities. For instance in 1614 A.D. Pancha

Bana, son of Sthānika Chennappa of Sravanabelgola wrote a literary work in Kannada, **Bhujabala Charitre**.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONS :

The role of the Sthānikas in religious matters was very striking. As manager of the temples of different deities, the Sthānikas conducted religious rituals and set right if these rituals went astray. In support of these we cite the following examples. A Saiva temple built at Aggere (Siddapur Taluka N.K.) by Kuppa Gavuda, his wife and their son Jakka-gavuda and their donation of lands to the temple was entrusted to one Sthānika Jakaya Jiya of Bilige. The above mentioned Sthānika had to perform **Snāna** (Bath) Naivedya (offering) to the deity. Further he was also responsible for the proper maintenance of the rituals in the temple. These are recorded in an inscription dated 1095 A.D. found in front of the Kalleniga temple there.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Sthānapati Kalayya-jiya had set up a linga in Baleyr in the year 1125 A.D.<sup>13a</sup> conducted the rituals and was entrusted to look after the land of the temple, donated by Baramma Gavunda.

Sthāntantri of the Banke-svara temple Gollakeri, Mangalore, was entrusted to perform all his duties connected with the deities such as **Avabhrita Snāna** on the occasion of every **Sankrānti** as known from the

Mangalore inscription dated in the year 1204 A.D.<sup>14</sup> The Kukke Subrahmanya Copper plate dated A.D. 1406 informs us that the various charities, for which endowments were made should be conducted by the Sthānikas of the temple.<sup>15</sup>

Besides, on certain occasion, the Sthānikas supervised the religious rituals conducted in different temples. For instance a stone inscription dated 1408 A.D.<sup>16</sup> in Tigalari script but in Kannada language, found in front of the Gunavantesvara temple (Honnavar Taluk, N.K.) states that Mahendrapuri Svami, the Sthānapati of the above temple was entrusted to supervise not only the rituals in the temple but the rituals in the temples of Kokkesvara (Manki) and Mahābalēsvara (Gokarna).

The Sthānapati supervised the religious rituals in the temple, Narasimha at Haladi as revealed in an inscription dated 1455 A.D.<sup>17</sup>

The Yermala inscription dated in the Pingala Samvat-sara = A.D. 1559 records that the religious rituals such as **Alankara Rangapuja**, Homa, Bali Puja performed in the temple should be administered by the Desadipati and Sthankartha.<sup>18</sup>

It is curious to note that the five **Sthānikas** of Gundami (near Kota, Udupi Taluk) granted land to Mani deva in the year A.D. 1560 for worship, offering of perpetual lamp on festive occasion and took the responsibility of supervising the rituals performed on certain occasions.<sup>19</sup>

Besides the above religious functions, the Sthānikas were authorized to report irregularity of rituals, if any, to the government. For instance such features occurred in the temple Sri Sāmtika Dēvi at Hegade (Kumta N. K.) as known from the unpublished copper plate inscription dated Saka 1485, deposited in the Durga

Paramesvari Temple at Uppunda (S.K.). The Sthānapati of the above temple, Sri Ramachandra Tirtha reported the irregularities of rituals to the ruling chief of the region, Chenna Bhaira Devi. Further the Sthānapati cooperated with the Government along with prominent individuals in set righting the matter.<sup>20</sup>

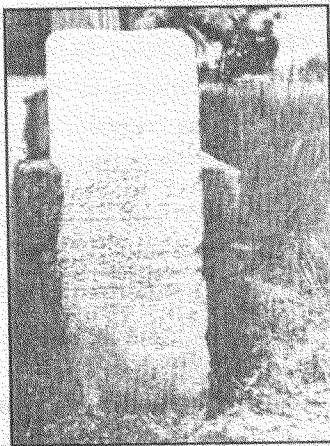
The study of a few inscriptions and Kadatas belonging to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicates that the Sthānikas in western Karnataka continued to be trustees and priests of temples and they regulated the religious rituals.<sup>21</sup>

The Sthānikas are followers of Advaita Philosophy, practice the Panchayatana form of worship. It seems that from 1346<sup>22</sup> they came under the fold of the Sringeri Matha and accepted its pontiffs as their Gurus. They showed high veneration to the Pontiffs of the Matha as known from various sources. For example, one of the unpublished Kadatas dated A.D. 1767 states that **Sthānikas** of the **Devasthanas** situated between Sivesvara and Subrahmanya have been disciples of the Sringeri Pontiff for many years.<sup>23</sup> They paid homages to the Pontiffs whenever the latter was on tours.

#### V. ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS :

In the economic set up the Sthānikas played prominent role as land owners in western Karnataka. A study of a few records convinces<sup>24</sup> us

#### Plate No. 1 : Posral Stone Inscription



**Significance :** It is the earliest inscription, dated 1215 A. D. in South Kanara which mentions Sthanika. The mention of the Sthanikas along with Nadavas and Okkalugalus, who set up Brahmotti Kallus in front of the Mahadeva temple at Posral is quite interesting it throws insight into the socio-religious position of the Sthanika.

that they owned lands and donated lands to the temples for the conduct of rituals. In certain cases the Sthānikas owned lands in many villages and towns. Further, they controlled the agrarian operations in the areas where they owned lands. In support of this we cite the following examples. The Mallavalli inscription Dated 1334 A.D. mentions that the Sthānapati of that place had control of lands in seven towns.<sup>25</sup> Similarly the Sthānikas of the Kantesvara temple had control of lands in 300 villages.<sup>26</sup> The study of the inscriptions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from coastal Karnataka reveals that the Sthānikas of the temple were land owners and leased temples land for tenancy cultivation and collected rents from the cultivators on behalf of the deities. All these were due to the following factors. With an increase of gifts of lands, cash etc. to the temples both from the state and devotees, temple management became complicated and we begin to hear more about the Sthānikas in the inscriptions and records of times. In such situation, the Government exercised general supervision over temples administration and did not hesitate to interfere through the agency of a special staff when things went wrong. But the regular cultivation of the temples lands including the regulation of tenancies and leases and investment of temples' money

as well as the control of the temples' staff which included a considerable number in large temples, vested in the Sthānikas.<sup>26a</sup> In short they controlled the interests of the temples' lands.

As the Sthānikas owned lands their role was felt in the land transactions such as sale, purchase mortgage and donations and even in cases of the land disputes. For instance Sthānapati belonging to Macankatte alias Bijjalesvara-pura assisted local Brahmanas in disposing of certain lands as known from an inscription dated 1179.<sup>27</sup>

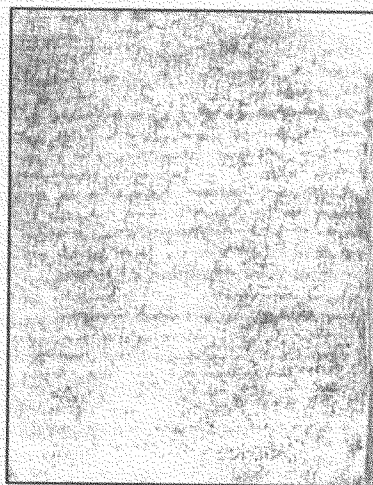
In another context, in the year 1215 A.D. the Sthānikas of **Kanikatte** (Arsikeri taluk Hassan district) played significant role in settling land disputes among the different communities namely settis Gauvadas Chammogavas (cobblers). The disputed lands belonged to the Kummatesvar

temple.<sup>27a</sup> The inscription dated 1406 A.D. of Kukke Subrahmanya temple informs us that the Sthānikas of the temple managed the granted land of the temple by leasing it to tenants and receiving the rents from them.<sup>28</sup>

The purchase of the land by the Sthānikas from the prominent persons of the locality is recorded in the Kuruvalli stone inscription. The record is dated in the year 1424 A.D.<sup>29</sup> The Sthānikas of Puttur and Hariharapura (Shimoga district) witnessed the land grant of the individuals as known from the inscriptions.<sup>30</sup>

The inscription dated in the year 1416, found in front of the temple Nachi Devi, Muluvagil is worthy to be noticed in connection with the **Sthānika's** role in the land transactions system. The epigraph discloses that the Sthānikas of the above temple

**Plate No. 2 : Unpublished Uppunda Copper Plate  
Dated A. D. 1562**



**Plate No. 2 :** Unpublished Copper Plate Inscription dated 1562 found in the Durga - Paramesvari Temple Uppunda significance. The Sthanpati was entrusted to the Pontiff of the Matha by the villagers. The Sthanpati was authorised to report irregularities, if any to the Government. He was assigned yet another duty i.e. of collection of original rent from the cultivators of the land of the temple.

owned lands in different villages and they contracted land deeds in the name of the deity.<sup>31</sup>

Besides, the study of the unpublished Kadatas and Palm leaf documents in certain regions reveals that the Sthanikas were also assigned by the Government to collect rents and revenues from the tenants and cultivators.

It is curious to note that in the land controlled system in western Karnataka, the Sthanikas as land controlling

magnets, enjoyed certain privileges and were entitled to special exemptions. One such exception was that their houses were exempted from the taxations.<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS :

Sthanikas on account of their hold over the religious institutions, played significant role in the Socio-economic set up in western Karnataka. They acted as guardian of traditional culture and contributed their might to the cultural activities. However,

towards the end of the eighteenth century, the position of the Sthanikas in Tulu speaking region of coastal Karnataka slurred.<sup>33</sup> In the next century they lost their reputed position in the social set up in South Kanara district. For this, the probable reasons are the acute Saiva-Vaisnava rivalry in the Tulu speaking region,<sup>34</sup> the changed political set up and the British revenue policies. However, further investigation is needed in the above matter.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R. Sharma Sastry (tr); Kautilya Artha Sastra, Bangalore 1960 Book II pp. 46-47, R. N. Saletore, Encyclopaedia of Indian Culture, New Delhi, 1989 Vol. IV p. 1382.
2. In North Kanara Sthanapatis were Generally heads of the Mathas. They are enjoying respectable position in the traditional social set up. See detail The Gunavante. Gokarna and Sivesvara inscriptions and records.
3. South Indian Inscriptions (cited this as SII) vii Nos. 231, 348, 349, 270. Epigraphia Carnatica (cited this as E. C.) viii sorab 275. Mysore Archaeological Report (M.A.R.) 1916, p. 62 Ibid 1932, No. 40 ARIE 1977 No. APA No. 1.
4. Karnataka Inscriptions, I 1939-40 No. 13 (Cited this as K. I) Ibid, V No. 13 p. 45. S. I. I vii No. 348 E. C V Ak No. 49.
5. E. C. vii Sk No. 105, Hn 108. Ibid, viii Sb No. 391, 275 See B. A Saletore, "Sthanikas and their Historical Importance" Journal of the Bombay University 1938, pp 49-62.
6. M.A.R. 1927 p. 147-148.
7. E. C viii Sb No. 391, pp. 70-71.
8. Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy (ARISE) 1930 No. 530 See K. V. Ramesh A History of South Kanara, Dharwad 1970) p. 294.
9. SII vii No. 349.
10. E. C V B1 No. 6 p. 46.
11. Ibid, vii Shi No. 21 p. 25.
- 11a. E. C viii Sb No. 276, M. A. R. 1932 No. 40, p. 203 The Sthanikas in the Harihara Pura Matha record are known as 'Buddhivanta'.
12. R. Narasimha Achar, Karnataka Kavacharitre II (Bangalore 1973) pp. 311-14.
13. KIV No. 13 pp. 45, 46.
- 13a. Ibid, No. 20 pp. 73-74.
14. SII vii No. 185.
15. M. A. R. 1943 No. 47, p. 148. The Sthanikas had close association with the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple for a long time.
16. Journal of the Epigraphical Studies Vol XVII p. 97-109 See Descriptive Lists of Stone and Copper plate Inscriptions Examined by K. R. I. Dharwad 1961 No. 58, p. 10.
17. ARSIE 1931 No. 313.
18. SII vii No. 269.
19. ARSIE 1930 No. 608 See K. G. Vasantha Madhava, Western Karnataka. Its Agrarian Relations, Navrang, Delhi 1991 p. 196.
20. See K. G. Vasantha Mahadeva, Religions in Coastal Karnataka Inter India, New Delhi pp 153-154.
21. E. C IX, Ma 25, 115, p. 54 Ibid, V B1 No. 6, p. 46 See A.K. Shastry, Sringeri Dharmasamastha Sringeri 1983, pp. 119-141.
22. A. K. Shastry, Ibid, pp. 29.
23. Ibid, Selections from the Kadatas of the Shringeri Matha (Unpublished submitted to the I. C. H. R., New Delhi) pp 274-276.
24. E. C. viii Sb, No. 276, 49, 34. Ibid, III No. Nj No. 180 M. AR. 1934 p. 83 ARSIE 1930 No. 608, Ibid, 1931 No. 313.
25. E. C. iii MI No. 99, 104, p. 66 See 109 p. 67.
26. SII vii No. 231.
- 26a. Nilakanta Sastri Development of Religion in South India (Madras 1965) pp 129, 130.
27. E. C. iv, kr No. 70, p. 110.
- 27a. Ibid, V Ak No. 49.
28. M. A. R. 1943 No. 47.
29. E. C. viii T1 No. 175.
30. ARSIE 1931 No. 344, ARIE - 1977 APA No. 1.
31. E. C. Xmb 7 p. 73.
32. M. A. R. 1933 No. 61 pp. 268-9.
33. Buchanan Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malbar II (Madras 1870) In the light of the scientific historical evidence, the slurring remarks on the Sthanika mentioned in the Buchanan's Journey are dismissed as unhistorical.
34. Saletore, B. A. Journal of the University of Bombay, p. 91, Note No. 198.